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Gale Virtual Reference Library: A Case for Electronic Reference Books

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Options for the E-reference Collection

by Sue Polanka

The electronic reference book revolution is in full swing, and nearly every reference book publisher is on board with the latest titles and interfaces for searching and retrieving top-notch scholarly resources. But which product will best suit your library? Which product has the best access and search features? And what about price—should you look for ownership or a subscription service? To assist with the reference e-book dilemma, this article examines five major electronic reference book products—ABC-CLIO's *History Reference Online*, *Gale Virtual Reference Library*, *Greenwood Digital Collection*, *Oxford Reference Online*, and *Xreferplus*—and compares them for content, search capabilities, interface, special features, and pricing. Each product has strengths, weaknesses, and unique bells and whistles. As one would expect, all of the products have similarities, including 24/7 unlimited simultaneous user access from the library or remotely; keyword searching across the entire collection or on one title, plus browsing options; persistent links at multiple levels, including the book title and entry heading; downloadable MARC records; and entries and indexes that are indexed in *Reference Universe*, a unique database that searches the content of both print and electronic reference materials. So, what makes them unique? The answer is content, interface, and special search and retrieval features, all of which are described in the individual reviews below and the comparison chart on p.94. These products were reviewed in July 2006 (numbers were updated in September), and, unless otherwise noted, pricing information is based on a four-year college or university with 5,000 FTE.

History Reference Online

ABC-CLIO's *History Reference Online* (HRO) collection contains more than 340 encyclopedias, handbooks, dictionaries, and guides focusing on U.S. and world history, current issues, politics, and geography. A large number of the titles are multivolume encyclopedias, and 85 percent were published from 2000 to the present. What makes HRO attractive is its simplicity. The home page offers one simple search box with options to search the full text, author, or title fields and a list of subjects in which to browse the collection. The default search is AND, allowing for other Boolean logic searches. Another attractive feature in HRO is the way in which results are ranked and displayed. Results are grouped by book title and sorted within the title for relevancy. For example, a search on *civil war* results in 80 book titles, each with multiple entries. Many of these titles are about the American Civil War; however, several for Korea and the Persian Gulf appear. A researcher with a focus on the American Civil War can easily weed out the titles and multiple entries that do not pertain to his or her research.

Once an entry is selected, users can view full text and have easy navigation through the rest of the book via the table of contents and forward-back page options. A searchable dictionary is also available. Citations, at the entry level, are available in American Psychological Association (APA), *Chicago Manual of Style*, Harvard, and Modern Language Association (MLA) styles. A new window is opened for each book title that one uses. These windows remain open during a session for easy navigation between titles. Depending on the type of research someone is doing, this feature can be advantageous or not, as multiple open windows can be confusing. HRO does not offer options for library cus-

tomization, nor are there store, mark, export, or e-mail options. The four-year-college annual subscription price is \$9,000 for more than 5,000 FTE and \$8,000 for less. Community-college pricing is \$7,000 and \$6,000, respectively.

Gale Virtual Reference Library

Gale Virtual Reference Library (GVRL) contains more than 700 reference titles from more than 25 publishers, including Gale, Wiley, Sage, and Cambridge, and focuses on multivolume encyclopedias from a variety of fields. Purchased title by title, GVRL can be customized to fit any library. GVRL runs on the PowerSearch interface, which is clean and structured with many special features. Content is easy to navigate with browse, basic, and advanced searches. Users may select from three basic search options—keyword (default), document title, or full text. Keyword searches the title, introductory text, authors, and first 50 words of an article. GVRL's advanced search offers several field-search types (document title, image caption, publication title, ISBN, author, start page, document number); limits by date, publication title, subject area, audience type, and documents with images; and search-history access—a feature unique to GVRL. Limits are only available on the advanced search screen. Results are ranked by relevance and may be sorted by document or publication title.

Several features stand out in GVRL. Articles are delivered in html (showing actual page breaks) with links to pdf versions. Users may mark, store, and export items for print, e-mail, or download. Multiple citation formats are included—APA, MLA, and plain text with direct exports to EndNote, ProCite, RefWorks, and Reference Manager. Articles can be translated into eight languages (but be careful: translation is not exact but rather employs a gisting software). The InfoMark tool allows the user to obtain persistent links to books or articles with options to bookmark or e-mail. E-books include all front and back matter with hyperlinked tables of content and indexes. The Subcollection Manager Tool allows libraries to create small subject collections within GVRL that can be linked to courses or subjects on the library Web site and searched separately from other GVRL content. Many articles include a find-similar-articles option, which utilizes e-book indexes. Libraries may use the customization options to include messages, logos, and links to library services and to track usage. Users may set preferences of font, colors, language, and number of results per page during their sessions. The cost of individual titles is 10 percent above the print cost. Annual hosting fees range from \$50 to \$300 depending on the number of titles owned.

Greenwood Digital Collection

The *Greenwood Digital Collection* includes more than 3,500 titles from Greenwood, Praeger, and Libraries Unlimited—encyclopedias, biographies, dictionaries, and primary documents. About 25 percent of the titles are reference and cover a variety of topics and fields in more than 24 subject areas. Users can browse the collection by title, subject, or author or perform a quick or advanced search of the entire collection, subject area, or an individual title. The quick search feature, available on nearly every page, performs a phrase search on the full text in the title or the entire collection. A user-initiated Boolean search is also acceptable. The advanced search offers two options. The standard search, with drop-down menus, will search by keyword, author, title, and LC or Dewey classification number using the AND, OR, and NOT operators. The Boolean search offers a free-form Boolean search by keyword, title, or author and access to eight operators. Both offer limits by